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ABSTRACT

A representative group of 4,000 California high school seniors was randomly assigned one of five essay topics. Each essay was given two independent ratings based on criteria specified for each topic by an advisory group of English teachers. On the basis of the scores, a representative subset of 750 essays was randomly selected from the top quarter, middle half, and bottom quarter of papers for each of the five topics. These were appraised for frequently occurring strengths and weaknesses on specific competencies (e.g., vocabulary, capitalization, spelling) and content (e.g., appropriate response to directions; tone, style; reasoning, support, development). Results indicated that the vast majority of seniors were able to communicate in writing; that students who wrote well tended to do well on all dimensions of writing, including content and mechanics; that the average scores for girls were slightly higher than for boys; and that school averages obtained by students on the state objective assessment tests correlated substantially (.79) with the averages of essay scores. Copies of scoring instructions and illustrative student essays are included in the report. (AA)

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CS 203 444

# An Assessment of the Writing Performance of California High School Seniors

CALIFORNIA STATE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION / Wilson Riles, Superintendent of Public Instruction
Sacramento, 1977

# An Assessment of the Writing Performance of California High School Seniors

*Prepared under the direction of*
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$2.75

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# Foreword

No other task is as demanding of our talents as the task of writing. Yet, no other task is more important. It is through what we write that we give permanence to our ideas and lasting meaning to our values. Writing is a necessary ingredient of our society and of civilization as we know it. It would be impossible to perpetuate the complex society we have developed without the art of writing. Thus, when we are told that our students are writing more incoherently and using a more "primer-like" style today than they were using just a few years ago, we cannot stand idly by and shake fingers at Madison Avenue or late night talk shows or the schools. The shaking will not solve the problem. We who care about people and the quality of their writing and, thus, their very lives, must ask pertinent questions, seek meaningful answers, and take positive actions to preserve and heighten the foundation of our culture.

This publication represents a positive action the Department of Education has taken to help reverse the decline in student writing. I invite you to examine the findings of the special assessment made of the writing of a sample group of California's high school seniors. But I also implore you to consider using the methods and materials of the state study in conducting an assessment of student writing in your own schools.

It may be equally important to examine the views the teachers in our schools hold regarding writing. In its recent newsletter, the Educational Press Association of America reported some disturbing news regarding the findings of Joseph M. Williams of the University of Chicago. According to the association, Dr. Williams has found in his research that too many "teachers of English (at secondary and college levels) will accept dim, cloudy, and confused language in preference to clear, crisp writing."

To combat the problem Dr. Williams has uncovered in his research and the problem described in many reports on the writing of high school students, the State Department of Education has been encouraging and supporting the Bay Area Writing Project. I am pleased to report that the project is going to be duplicated in eight other regions of the state within the next six to 18 months, and it will be known as the California Writing Project.

Initiated by the University of California at Berkeley and strongly supported by the Department, the project has developed a model program to improve the writing ability of students in the public schools. Educating teachers to teach writing more effectively is the key to the project's success. Approximately 80 Bay Area teachers have been trained in summer workshops. They, in turn, have trained more than 1,000 teachers in the techniques of teaching written expression. This approach has benefited the more than 100,000 students of these teachers. It is projected that with the expansion of the program to a statewide effort it will be reaching an estimated one-half million students within two years.

Working cooperatively in the statewide effort are units of the state college and university system, campuses of the University of California, several offices of county superintendents of schools, and the Department of Education. Plans now call for some centers to start in the summer of 1977 and others to be operating by the summer of 1978. It is estimated that approximately 270 to 300 teachers will be trained each summer to participate in the California Writing Project.

I am gratified that the leaders of the Bay Area Writing Project did not shake fingers of blame at someone for the problem of poor student writing; they proceeded directly to finding remedies. The project leaders reasoned that teachers needed appropriate inservice education to strengthen their skills as teachers of composition. Their assumption has been proved correct from the results of the project. A preliminary study has found that the writing scores of students of teachers who have been involved in the project have improved significantly.

I am pleased that so many dedicated, knowledgeable people are not only concerned about writing but are also taking positive steps to ensure that our children do not step into the twenty-first century crippled by an inability to express ideas clearly, concisely, and confidently.

Alexander Pope once wrote that "true ease in writing comes from art, not chance," so let us all continue in our efforts to help people develop their writing skills. No other task is more important to the future of our complex society. As Edwin S. Newman of NBC News wrote recently, " . . . a country that deals in slogans and trick phrases, that allows its language to deteriorate and fall into disrespect, is likely to find itself deteriorating in other ways. Those who do not examine words critically," he wrote, "are not likely to examine ideas critically."

*Superintendent of Public Instruction*

# Preface

Since the 1974-75 school year, California students in grade twelve have been completing the *Survey of Basic Skills: Grade 12,* part of which assesses student achievement in written expression. Active in the development and improvement of the written expression portion of the *Survey* has been the English Language Assessment Advisory Committee, established by the State Department of Education. In 1975 the committee members, Department of Education staff, and a large number of English teachers cooperated in a study to determine:

- The degree to which the results of the written expression portion of the *Survey of Basic Skills: Grade 12,* an objective test, provide a valid measurement of the writing ability of California's high school seniors
- The degree of writing competency demonstrated by California's high school seniors
- The most typical strengths and weaknesses of the writing skills of California's high school seniors

Equipped with the results of the study, called the California Writing Assessment, the Department could then revise the *Survey* if needed and inform the public of the status of the writing skills of high school seniors.

How those conducting the study went about their work and what they found are explained in this publication. The Department of Education is grateful to the members of the English Language Assessment Advisory Committee and the many English teachers who participated in the study. Without their help the study, lacking special funding, would have foundered.

Persons reading this report should not neglect the appendixes, especially Appendix C, which contains illustrative essays written by participating students. As the authors of this publication point out, the essays may be used to interpret the results of the study and to rate the quality of other essays.

We urge readers to use the report to develop ways for improving the writing performance of California schoolchildren of every age. We believe the report can be used as a model for every school district that wishes to conduct its own writing assessment.

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*Chief Deputy Superintendent*
*of Public Instruction*

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*Evaluation and Research*

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# Summary of the Assessment of Writing Performance

During 1975 the California State Department of Education conducted a study of the writing performance of California students in grade twelve. The study, which is described in this report, *An Assessment of the Writing Performance of California High School Seniors,* had two major purposes:

- To validate and improve the objective test of written experession in the *Survey of Basic Skills: Grade 12* (Sacramento: California State Department of Education, 1974) used in the California Assessment Program
- To assess the overall quality of and strengths and weaknesses in the writing performance of California students in grade twelve

The California Writing Assessment was conducted by asking a representative group of students in grade twelve in the state to write an essay. More than 4,000 high school seniors in 28 schools were randomly assigned one of five topics:

1. Describe a favorite object.
2. Give directions on how to do or make something.
3. Compose a letter describing a pictured event.
4. Discuss an invention that mankind would be better off without.
5. Describe, from a diagram, an automobile accident.

Fifty-one English teachers were then asked to evaluate the essays according to sets of scoring instructions especially designed for each topic by an advisory group of English teachers. All essays were given two independent ratings based on the specified criteria for each topic. The sum of the two ratings provided a total score for each essay that reflected the overall quality of the essay.

An additional analysis was needed to obtain information on the specific strengths and weaknesses of the students' writing. On the basis of the original scores, a representative subset of 750 essays was randomly selected from the top quarter, middle half, and bottom quarter of papers for each of the five topics assigned. Twelve of the original 51 evaluators appraised the essays for frequently occurring strengths and weaknesses in the high, middle, and low groups.

This report contains baseline data on the writing performance of California students in grade twelve. The report shows the number and percent of seniors who are able to write at various levels of proficiency. Comparisons with the writing of seniors in previous years or with national samples could not be made because the needed data do not exist.

The major findings of the study are the following:

- Although a steady decline has occurred in scores on the standardized tests of written expression used in the California Assessment Program, the study indicated that the vast majority of seniors in California were able to communicate in writing. Only a very small percent of students were completely unable to communicate in written English.
- Student essays showed a great range and variety of writing skill. Students who wrote well tended to do well in all dimensions of writing, including content and mechanics. Students who wrote poorly tended to have difficulties in all dimensions of writing.
- For each of the five topics assigned, the average scores for girls were slightly higher than those for boys.
- The school averages of scores obtained by students on the *Survey of Basic Skills: Grade 12,* the state's objective assessment instrument, were found to correlate substantially (.79) with the averages of the essay scores. That is, schools that scored high on the objective test tended to score high on the writing sample, and schools that scored low on the objective test tended to score low on the writing sample.

# Introduction to the Assessment

The origins of the California Writing Assessment can be traced to 1972 legislation (Assembly Bill 665) that changed the state testing program in several fundamental ways. One major change was the requirement to develop tests based on the instructional objectives and curriculum common to California public schools instead of commercially published tests developed for use nationally.

To accomplish this changeover, the California State Department of Education established several advisory curriculum committees to assist in identifying objectives for pupils in grades two and three in reading and for students in grades six and twelve in reading, mathematics, written expression, and spelling. The English Language Assessment Advisory Committee was established to assist in the construction of the *Test Content Specifications for the Survey of Basic Skills, Written Expression and Spelling, Grades Six and Twelve* (Sacramento: California State Department of Education, 1975). This document served as a blueprint for the subsequent development of the written expression and spelling sections of the *Survey of Basic Skills* for grades six and twelve.

From the beginning, members of the English advisory committee argued that an essay test would provide a more valid measure of writing ability than would an objective multiple-choice test. However, it was not economically feasible to score essays annually for all students in grades six and twelve in the state as part of the California Assessment Program. The Department of Education agreed, therefore, to conduct a special assessment of student writing as a means of validating and improving the objective tests of written expression. Correlations between test items and actual student writing scores could then be used as criteria in the revision of the objective tests. This effort was the primary purpose of the California Writing Assessment.

A second purpose of the study was to assess the actual writing performance of a representative group of California students in grade twelve. For the past several years, a decline in grade twelve scores on nationally standardized objective tests of written expression has occurred. To ascertain the meaning of the downward trend, the Department of Education had to find out how well students could actually write. The increasing publicity in recent months about student writing performance also underlined the importance of investigating student writing through studies such as this one.

Because directly comparable data for the state or nation were lacking, year-to-year and national comparisons could not be made. Thus, the results of the California Writing Assessment simply constitute baseline data for the state. This information can be used in the formulation of general suggestions for improving classroom instruction in composition and as comparative data for future state writing assessments. The methods and materials developed for the California Writing Assessment can be used by school districts that wish to conduct their own needs assessment in writing at various grade levels. These districts may want to take special note of the procedures used in conducting the California Writing Assessment that are described in this report.

Because no special funding was provided for this project, the Department of Education is especially grateful to the English Language Assessment Advisory Committee and to the many English teachers who made this study possible through their collective efforts. The names of those who contributed to the study can be found in Appendix A.

# Design of the Assessment

The design of the California Writing Assessment is described in this section.

### Collection of Samples of Student Writing

California high schools were divided into three groups according to school size (enrollment). The three groups were then subdivided into ten levels on the basis of students' 1973 scores in written expression on the *Iowa Tests of Educational Development* (Chicago: Science Research Associates, Inc.). The result was a 3 x 10 matrix of 30 groups or cells. One school was selected at random from each cell for a total sample of 30 schools. Results were actually obtained from 28 schools. All seniors who were present in the 28 schools on the day the essay test was administered were randomly assigned one of five topics and were asked to write an essay on that topic. A total of 4,116 samples of student writing were thereby collected for the study.

### Collection of Information from Students

Before the students wrote essays on their assigned topics, they were asked to fill out an information form containing the following items:

1. Sex.

   ☐ Male ☐ Female

2. Are you now enrolled in an English class?

   ☐ Yes ☐ No

3. Check the grades in which you were enrolled in a course listed as either composition, English, or speech.

   ☐ Nine ☐ Ten ☐ Eleven

4. During the past 12 months, did you write a letter to order something through the mail? ☐ Yes ☐ No

5. Other than for a school assignment, have you ever written any of the following?

| | *Yes* | *No* |
|---|---|---|
| a. Poem | ☐ | ☐ |
| b. Short story | ☐ | ☐ |
| c. Play | ☐ | ☐ |
| d. Story for a newspaper | ☐ | ☐ |
| e. Article for a magazine | ☐ | ☐ |
| f. Words for a song | ☐ | ☐ |

6. As a school assignment, have you ever written any of the following?

| | *Yes* | *No* |
|---|---|---|
| a. Poem | ☐ | ☐ |
| b. Short story | ☐ | ☐ |
| c. Play | ☐ | ☐ |
| d. Story for a newspaper | ☐ | ☐ |
| e. Article for a magazine | ☐ | ☐ |
| f. Words for a song | ☐ | ☐ |

### Administration of the Writing Assessment

An advisory group of English teachers developed five essay topics (to elicit a variety of writing skills) as well as specific instructions for administering the writing assessment. In February, 1975, each participating student was randomly assigned one of the five essay topics and was given 40 minutes in which to write an essay. The five essay topics were the following:

1. *Essay Topic A: Describing an Object. Directions:* Describe an object (not a person, animal, or event) you are especially attached to and tell why you feel strongly about it. You might want to consider the way you discovered it, the way it came into your life, or the way it has taken on meaning through time.
2. *Essay Topic B: Giving Directions. Directions:* When we make or do something, we usually follow certain procedures. There are certain steps to follow in baking bread, tarring a roof, cutting a pattern, painting a house, repairing a

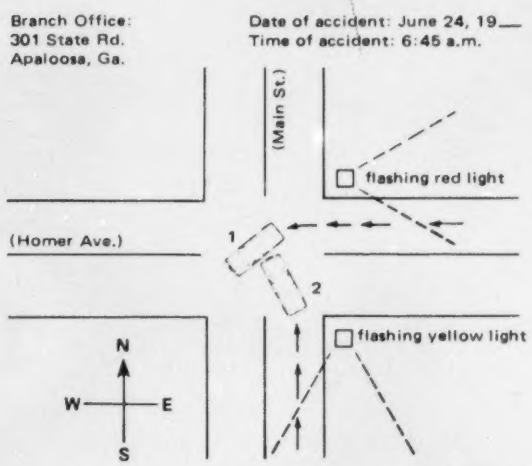
car, developing film, changing a tire, and performing other such activities. Choose something that you know how to make or do. Describe from the beginning the steps that you follow in order to make it or do it. Make the directions as simple and clear as possible. Someone who is not familiar with the process that you are describing should be able to understand and follow your directions.

3. *Essay Topic C: Writing a Letter. Directions:* Look at the picture carefully. Pretend that you know about the situation because you were there. Then pretend you are one of the following people: (1) an older student helper writing to the principal of the school; or (2) a parent writing to the parent of the little girl; or (3) a member of the audience writing to the music teacher. Then write a letter to the person named, explaining what you saw and **what you think about it.**

***Los Angeles Times*** photograph

4. *Essay Topic D: Discussing an Invention. Directions:* Not all inventions have been good for all people. Name one invention we would be better off without. Discuss why we would be better off as a civilization without that invention.

5. *Essay Topic E: Describing an Accident. Directions:* Here is a diagram of an automobile accident. Study the diagram for a while and then describe the accident in your own words.




Redrawn from an NAEP report

For convenience, the essays are referred to in this report as follows:

1. Essay Topic A: *Object* (describing an object)
2. Essay Topic B: *Directions* (giving directions)
3. Essay Topic C: *Letter* (writing a letter)
4. Essay Topic D: *Invention* (discussing an invention)
5. Essay Topic E: *Accident* (describing an accident)

### Method of Scoring Writing Samples

In June, 1975, a total of 51 experienced secondary English teachers, curriculum specialists, and college professors from various parts of California scored the writing samples. These judges themselves first wrote an essay on the topic they were assigned to score. In the light of this writing experience, they examined and refined separate scoring criteria developed for each topic by an advisory group of English teachers.

Holistic scoring procedures were used to rate the essays. That is, the judges read each paper for a total impression and then made a global or holistic judgment expressed by a number ranging from 1 to 9 for most essays. Essays A and D were also given a score for the mechanics of written English.

All essays received two independent ratings. Significant discrepancies between ratings were reconciled by the judges or by a third party if necessary. The two numbers were combined for a total score. Table 1 summarizes the criteria considered, the scale, the possible range, and the reliability for each essay topic.

**TABLE 1**

**Scoring Criteria for Essay Topics**

| Essay topic | Categories | Scale | Possible range for the sum of the two judges' ratings | Interjudge reliability |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| A: Object . . . . . | *Overall composition:* A holistic score that identifies the writer's overall sense of composition (thought processes, insights, coherence). | 1–9 | 2–18 | .79 |
| | *Overall competency:* A holistic score that reflects the writer's overall competencies with written English (sentence structure, conventions, usage). | 1–5 | 2–10 | .54 |
| B: Directions . . . | *Overall composition:* A holistic score that reflects both the writer's overall sense of composition and overall competencies with written English. | 0–9 | 0–18 | .77 |
| C: Letter . . . . . | *Aspect I:* Punctuation and sentence structure. | 1–3 | | |
| | *Aspect II:* Diction, clarity, and ease of expression. | 1–3 | 4–20 | .73 |
| | *Aspect III:* Ingenuity of approach and skill in execution. | 1–3 | | |
| | Bonus, penalty points. | (+1,-1) | | |
| D: Invention . . . . | *Overall composition:* The first decision to make is whether the paper is in the upper half or lower half. Is the paper a 2, 4, 6, or 8? Then refine scoring, using odd numbers to reward things that stand out (language use, freshness, crispness) or to lower the score of a paper that was difficult to read. | 1–9 | 2–18 | .74 |
| | *Overall competency:* The reader judges the writer's overall skills in punctuation, diction and usage, and sentence sense. | 1–5 | 2–10 | .52 |
| E: Accident . . . . | *Overall composition:* For a description to be acceptable, it must mention five of the six pieces of information identified in the diagram of the accident. | 0–9 | 0–18 | .81 |

### Appraisal of Strengths and Weaknesses

The ratings obtained from the first scoring reflected the overall quality of the essays but provided no information about specific strengths and weaknesses. An additional analysis was needed to obtain this kind of diagnostic information. After considering a variety of possible analytical scoring strategies, the English Language Assessment Advisory Committee recommended that an informal impressionistic method be used in rereading some of the essays to identify their common strengths and weaknesses. A representative sample of the essays was selected by the separation of the essays for each topic into three groups—approximately the top quarter, the middle half, and the lower quarter—on the basis of the combined holistic scores. Fifty essays were then randomly selected from each group for each essay so that 150 essays per topic, or 750 in all, were selected.

In the spring of 1976, twelve of the judges who had participated in the earlier scoring appraised the 750 essays for common strengths and weaknesses. They were given a checklist defining *strength* and *weakness* and serving to standardize terminology (see Appendix B). The judges revised the checklist and practiced with it until they reached substantial agreement on how essays were to be scored. A reliability check confirmed that the judges generally agreed with one another in their appraisals of the strengths and weaknesses of certain essays.

# Findings of the Assessment

The findings of the California Writing Assessment are described in this section.

### Data Obtained from Student Information Forms

Data obtained from student information forms are summarized in Table 2. Only about half of the students were currently enrolled in an English class, although more than 80 percent had taken some kind of English course in grades nine, ten, and eleven. Poems and short stories were the most common products of student writing (whether for a school assignment or not), although students were about twice as likely to have written either of these as a school assignment.

### Overview of Essays Scored

In most cases the handwriting on the essays was neat and legible (see sample essays in Appendix C). The variety of writing exercises elicited a variety of writing skills and styles. For example, the directions and accident topics are examples of utilitarian writing that one might do for practical reasons. The object, the letter, and the invention topics are examples of writing likely to occur in a school setting. The essays on the directions and accident topics were described by the judges as frequently dull and unoriginal, whereas the essays on the object and letter topics were more commonly described as creative.

The letter and accident topics both involved a visual stimulus. Some judges believed that this stimulus made it easier for the students to write their essays by providing them with concrete details and a point of view. The letter topic also provided the students with an audience for their comments.

The favorite object topic evoked a personal essay style. Students wrote mostly about cars, rings, and books (including several essays on the Bible). Many of these essays were written with humor and ingenuity. The directions topic gener-

**TABLE 2**

**Data Obtained from Student Information Form**

| Student characteristic | Percent of students |
|---|---|
| Sex | |
| Male | 51 |
| Female | 49 |
| Current enrollment in an English class | 51 |
| Prior completion of English, composition, or speech class | |
| Grade nine | 86 |
| Grade ten | 89 |
| Grade eleven | 83 |
| Writing experiences | |
| Students who had written a letter to order something through the mail in the past year | 49 |
| Students who had written the following *other than* for a school assignment: | |
| Poem | 48 |
| Short story | 40 |
| Play | 10 |
| Story for a newspaper | 15 |
| Article for a magazine | 6 |
| Words for a song | 30 |
| Students who had written any of the following as a school assignment: | |
| Poem | 77 |
| Short story | 90 |
| Play | 27 |
| Story for a newspaper | 35 |
| Article for a magazine | 18 |
| Words for a song | 15 |

ally triggered a cookbook style of writing characterized by imperative sentences and step-by-step instructions. Some students handled the topic very effectively by writing a list. Those who did not resort to a list frequently ran into difficulties with paragraphing. The low group demonstrated more strengths with this topic than with any of the other topics. The subjects of the essays varied from breadmaking and vegetable gardening to making a touchdown and changing a tire.

The letter topic provided an opportunity for students to project themselves into another role based upon the situation depicted in the photograph. This picture stimulated many creative, personal responses as well as an extensive array of social commentary. Some students whose papers were placed in the low group were unable to handle the letter format adequately. The invention topic may have offered the greatest challenge because it was the most abstract of the five topics. Judges noted a scarcity of ideas and an overuse of generalities in many of the papers. The overriding majority of students wrote about bombs, guns, and cars; but a few students wrote about television and snowmobiles. The accident topic was perhaps the most structured of the five topics. Although most responses were factual descriptions of the accident, a few students transformed the exercise into a piece of creative fiction.

### Ratings of Overall Essay Quality

The results of the ratings of overall quality are shown in tables 3 through 7 and are contained within the sections on scoring instructions. Illustrative student essays are included in Appendix C to aid in the interpretation of scores. The results have been presented as distributions instead of averages so that readers may see the range of abilities and make their own judgments about the acceptability of the various levels of performance.

The tables show that a great range existed in the quality of student essays. Most essays received ratings in the middle of the possible range of scores, and progressively fewer high and low scores occurred. This distribution led the judges to conclude that, although not many flawless essays had been written, the great majority of students were able to communicate through writing. For every topic only a very small number of students were unable to communicate their thoughts through written English. All student variables were analyzed in relation to writing performance. The only noteworthy finding was that for each of the five topics, the average score for girls was slightly higher than that for boys.

### Appraisal of Strengths and Weaknesses

The appraisal of strengths and weaknesses produced the following findings, which are presented in an abbreviated form in Table 8.

#### High Group

Students in the high group typically demonstrated strength in almost all dimensions of writing. Like those in the other groups, students in the high group wrote appropriate responses to directions and frequently achieved consistency of tone. Many students in this group wrote creative responses regardless of the topic. Vocabulary choices were judged as precise, fresh, and original. Sentence structure was generally effective and varied. Paragraph development was ordered, coherent, and well-supported with vivid detail. Standard English usage, spelling, capitalization, and punctuation were all judged to be strengths. However, students in the high group did demonstrate some difficulties in the correct use of punctuation.

#### Middle Group

Students in the middle group demonstrated a wide range of writing ability. The great majority wrote appropriate responses to the directions. Observation, description, and consistency of tone were frequently noted strengths. Precision of vocabulary was commonly observed as a strength, and difficulties with standard English usage (especially with pronoun reference) were also noted frequently. Although essays in this group revealed that the student writers had a basic grasp of sentence structure, they also revealed that the students had certain difficulties with sentences, such as redundancies, incoherencies, little variety or complexity, and awkward phrasing. Although there was a sense of order and organization, lack of paragraph development emerged as a dominant weakness, exemplified by such problems as insufficient supporting detail and inconsistency of tone. Skill in punctuation was judged as basically adequate, although students did have some difficulties using the comma and the apostrophe. Capitalization and spelling were also judged adequate.

#### Low Group

Although some students whose papers were placed in the low group failed to follow directions, the majority responded in an appropriate and

consistently serious manner to the writing task. However, these students produced work that was typically deficient in all other dimensions. Most papers in this group were excessively brief. In those cases where the essays were lengthy, they tended to ramble. Consequently, paragraphs and the essays as a whole were typically weak in reasoning, support, organization, and logical development. A variety of problems occurred with sentences, including run-on constructions, unvarying structures, partial coherence, and awkward phrasing. Departures from standard English usage were common, and vocabulary was limited and lacking in variety. Misspellings were prevalent. Punctuation errors were common, especially errors in the use of the comma and the apostrophe.

### Correlations with the Survey of Basic Skills

The correlation coefficients between the school mean scores on the written expression section of the *Survey of Basic Skills: Grade 12* and the school mean scores for the various essays are presented in Table 9.

Correlations between the scores on the written expression portion of the *Survey of Basic Skills* and the scores on the writing assessment indicated that a substantial relationship existed between the two sets of averages. The correlation between the average essay score and the average written expression score at the school level was .79. Schools that scored high on the objective test tended to score high on the writing sample, and schools that scored low on the objective test tended to score low on the writing sample. (See footnote b in Table 9 for a further explanation of correlation coefficients.)

Other correlations varied according to the essay topic, the scoring instructions, and the reporting categories of the written expression test. Of the correlations between written expression, total scores, and separate essay scores, the highest were for Essay A (competency/mechanics)–.71; and for Essay E–.70. Of the correlations between subtests of written expression and the essays, the highest were for the capitalization and punctuation category–.77, .81, .81, .77, .65, and .80. These correlations may well reflect the confidence with which more assured writers managed conventions in the longer, more complex sentences they were capable of writing.

The substantial correlations are especially notable when two sources of error are considered. First, the correlations are limited by the unreliability of each instrument. Although the interjudge reliabilities were about as high as could be expected, they were, nevertheless, a limiting factor. If the reliabilities had been higher, the correlations between the two measures would have been higher. Second, error was associated with both sets of scores because a one-month gap existed between the administration of the two measures. It was not likely that the same populations of students were present on both testing dates. This fact undoubtedly reduced the correlations between the two measures. Therefore, all correlations in Table 9 constitute underestimates of the true relationships.

## Scoring Instructions for Essay Topic A

*(See Table 3 for results.)*

**Writing Directions for the Student**

Describe an object (not a person, animal, or event) you are especially attached to and tell why you feel strongly about it. You may want to consider the way you discovered it, the way it came into your life, or the way it has taken on meaning through time.

The assignment does not require the students to confine themselves to prose or to refrain from using satire or arody.

Blank papers or papers in which the writers ignore the assignment or quarrel with the instructions or the proctors should not be scored according to the directions which follow; they should be referred to the table leader.

Each paper will receive two scores:

1. A holistic score which identifies the writer's overall sense of composition (thought processes, insights, coherence)
2. A holistic score which identifies the writer's overall competencies with written English (sentence structure, conventions, usage)

**Score for Composition**

First, the reader assigns an even number score according to the following descriptions:

*8* The writer identifies an object, supplies descriptive details, and provides a strong accounting for his or her attachment to the object either through lively anecdote or an insightful discussion of values (usually more than one value). The paper has almost no irrelevant statements and has an easily observable

**TABLE 3**

**Scores for Essay Topic A: Describing an Object**

| Composition | | | Competency in English | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Combined score* | Number of essays per score | Percent of essays per score | Combined score* | Number of essays per score | Percent of essays per score |
| 18 | 1 | .1 | 10 | 4 | .5 |
| 17 | 2 | .2 | 9 | 21 | 2.4 |
| 16 | 10 | 1.2 | 8 | 72 | 8.4 |
| 15 | 18 | 2.1 | 7 | 173 | 20.1 |
| 14 | 50 | 5.8 | 6 | 359 | 41.8 |
| 13 | 61 | 7.1 | 5 | 143 | 16.6 |
| 12 | 107 | 12.5 | 4 | 74 | 8.6 |
| 11 | 137 | 16.0 | 3 | 9 | 1.0 |
| 10 | 80 | 9.4 | 2 | 4 | .5 |
| 9 | 100 | 11.7 | | | |
| 8 | 115 | 13.5 | | | |
| 7 | 65 | 7.6 | | | |
| 6 | 65 | 7.6 | | | |
| 5 | 26 | 3.0 | | | |
| 4 | 11 | 1.3 | | | |
| 3 | 6 | .7 | | | |
| 2 | 1 | .1 | | | |

*The sum of the ratings by the two judges.

coherence or plan. The writer wastes no space on talking about how hard it is to think of something to write about, nor does he or she begin simplistically with a formula, such as, "The object I am going to write about is . . ."

*6* The writer gives some descriptive detail about the object and at least one examined reason for his or her attachment to the object. The paper has no serious incoherence and little in the way of irrelevant or digressive statements.

*4* The writer merely names the object and says a bare minimum about his or her reasons for having the attachment to the object; or the writer describes an object without stating or implying much about the personal attachment. In some cases the writer may confuse the issue by talking about drawbacks or disadvantages to the possession (for example, wanting to sell it and get a better one). The paper may be somewhat incoherent or contain clearly irrelevant statements or issues.

*2* The writer does not seem to have understood what he or she has been asked to do. For example, the paper may simply volunteer a topic which has not been called for. The paper will usually contain obvious irrelevancies or be so halting and brief that it communicates little information to the reader.

After deciding upon an even number score, the reader may add a single bonus point or subtract a single penalty point for any one of the following reasons:

| Bonus (+1) | Penalty (−1) |
|---|---|
| Uncommon coherence | Fumbling order |
| Uncommon insights | Trivialities |
| Uncommon length and detail | Lackluster brevity |

**Score for Competency in English**

The reader judges the writer's overall skills in punctuation, diction and usage, and sentence sense. Scores are assigned according to the following broad descriptions:

*5* Outstandingly varied, mature sentences, with strong diction and almost no errors; notable in use of subordination and free of modifiers

*4* Above-average sentence sense; few errors in usage or punctuation (and none of them major); perhaps some hint of a sense of style

*3* About average for the papers scored; many short sentences, perhaps with some comma faults and an occasional fragment; but overall, a suggestion that the student has a fair grasp of sentence sense

*2* A cluster of errors in grammar, usage, and punctuation, or a paper which has a dead-level simplicity and monotony of style; practically no sentence without an error of some kind; but in spite of these problems, generally readable

*1* A paper so badly marred with problems that the reader can hardly follow the ideas presented, either because of stumbling syntax (mixed structures and the like) or because of word choices and such egregious form problems (including spelling) that the reader finds it difficult to be sympathetic with the writer

*Note:* Matters of spelling are intentionally *not* specified in the descriptions of papers rated 5, 4, 3, and 2. The reader should ignore spelling except for the 1 paper. This category allows for the paper with so many misspelled words that the reader must actually struggle to follow the thread of thought. Such a paper suggests a degree of near illiteracy.

## Scoring Instructions for Essay Topic B

*(See Table 4 for results.)*

### Writing Directions for the Student

When we make or do something, we usually follow certain procedures. There are certain steps to follow in baking bread, tarring a roof, cutting a pattern, painting a house, repairing a car, developing film, changing a tire, and performing other such activities. Choose something that you know how to make or do. Describe from the beginning the steps that you follow in order to make it or do it. Make the directions as simple and clear as possible. Someone who is not familiar with the process that you are describing should be able to understand and follow your directions.

### Possible Scores

*9–8* Superior papers deal with a subject with which the writer is familiar enough to (1) *identify* the materials involved; and (2) list the steps from *beginning to end.*

The superior writer gives a suitable introduction to identify the subject. He or she frequently uses supporting examples or written illustrations to explain the procedures. No distracting errors in mechanics, usage, word form, or syntax should be apparent.

*Sentence structure and diction.* An extremely well-written response may be scored a point higher than it would be scored on the basis of content alone. A poorly written response may be scored a point lower. A very poorly written response will place the paper in the lower half of the papers written for topic B.

In general, papers rated in the upper half have more density and texture.

*7* This score is useful for thinner versions of papers rated 8 or 9. It will probably serve as the top score for such papers. Although the writer handled the topic well, he or she missed a specific transition from one step to the next. Papers which are overly technical and somewhat confusing may fall within this range. In addition, a paper receiving a 7 score may contain an error in usage or mechanics.

*6–5* These scores will prove useful as top scores for those papers in which the description of how to do something or make something is generally well-handled but in which the writer has neglected to list needed materials. These papers are uneven in quality and may contain some errors in mechanics or usage.

*4–3* Lower-half scores will include responses which do one or more of the following:

a. Does not make clear what procedure is described
b. Does not identify materials to be used

**TABLE 4**

**Scores for Essay Topic B: Giving Directions**

| Combined score* | Number of essays per score | Percent of essays per score |
|---|---|---|
| 18 | 2 | .2 |
| 17 | 14 | 1.6 |
| 16 | 32 | 3.7 |
| 15 | 57 | 6.6 |
| 14 | 82 | 9.5 |
| 13 | 112 | 12.9 |
| 12 | 106 | 12.2 |
| 11 | 122 | 14.1 |
| 10 | 82 | 9.5 |
| 9 | 107 | 12.3 |
| 8 | 62 | 7.2 |
| 7 | 44 | 5.1 |
| 6 | 22 | 2.5 |
| 5 | 14 | 1.6 |
| 4 | 2 | .2 |
| 3 | 2 | .2 |
| 2 | 5 | .6 |

*The sum of the ratings by the two judges.

c. Leaves out steps necessary to follow the procedure
d. Rambles; does not follow a progression of steps
e. Summarizes; does not explain the steps of a process

These papers may contain errors in mechanics, usage, word form, or syntax.

*2* This score will be useful for those papers which compound the weakenesses of 4–3 scores and show little knowledge of word form and syntax.

*1* This score is to be used for any response which has almost no redeeming qualities.

*0* No response.

## Scoring Instructions for Essay Topic C

*(See Table 5 for results.)*

**Writing Directions for the Student**

Look at the picture carefully. Pretend that you know about the situation because you were there. Then pretend you are *one* of the following people: (1) an older student helper writing to the principal of the school; or (2) a parent writing to the parent of the little girl; or (3) a member of the audience writing to the music teacher.

Then write a letter to the person named, explaining what you saw and what you think about it.

**Instructions to Raters**

We are not asking you to make fine distinctions in rating the writers' performance but merely to rate each on a three-value scale of good-fair-poor: good, 3; fair, 2; poor, 1.

Furthermore, we are not requiring you to rate the whole writing performance with one score. Instead, we ask that you evaluate each paper on several separate aspects. These instructions will describe each of these aspects so that we can be certain that all scorers are in agreement on what is being evaluated in each. Do your best to separate these aspects, to avoid halo effects, and to give the writers their due. Resolve doubts about scoring by moving the score toward the middle score (2) rather than toward the extreme (1 and 3).

*Aspect I: Punctuation and Sentence Structure.* Under this category would fall such errors as mistaken use of commas, quotation marks, end punctuation, apostrophes, colons, semicolons, and dashes. Also, Aspect I scores are weakened by such errors as sentence overloads, run-on sentences, comma splices, and fragments of sentences ignorantly or accidentally punctuated as complete sentences. Watch for unnecessary punctuation. Misuse of capitals and faulty paragraphing would also be considered under Aspect I.

*Aspect II: Diction, Clarity, and Ease of Expression.* In evaluating this aspect of the writing, the scorer should lower the score for such errors as malapropisms, wordiness, paucity of vocabulary, circumlocution, jargon, repetitiousness, needless lack of economy and directness, excessive use of euphemisms, inappropriate levels of usage, damaged or mixed figures of speech, triteness of metaphor, faulty parallelism, awkward phrasing, lack of concreteness, excessive formality, imprecise word choice, and general incoherence. Gross misspelling, particularly of commonly used words, would lower this score, too.

Note also that misplaced and dangling modifiers, squinting modifiers, faulty subject-verb agreement, and problems of pronoun reference and agreement would lower a score in Aspect II because they destroy clarity and ease of expression.

*Aspect III: Ingenuity of Approach and Skill in Execution:* In Aspect III, the reader will evaluate the content. This writing assignment requires that the writer project into a picture. Look for the writer's skill in observation (which has always been a key talent of creative writers) and his or her cleverness in going beyond the obvious and most superficial reaction to the picture—both of which are

**TABLE 5**

**Scores for Essay Topic C: Composing a Letter**

| Combined score* | Number of essays per score | Percent of essays per score |
|---|---|---|
| 18 | 3 | .6 |
| 17 | 18 | 3.4 |
| 16 | 23 | 4.4 |
| 15 | 30 | 5.7 |
| 14 | 42 | 8.0 |
| 13 | 48 | 9.2 |
| 12 | 51 | 9.8 |
| 11 | 62 | 11.9 |
| 10 | 65 | 12.4 |
| 9 | 54 | 10.3 |
| 8 | 52 | 9.9 |
| 7 | 34 | 6.5 |
| 6 | 16 | 3.1 |
| 5 | 18 | 3.4 |
| 4 | 6 | 1.1 |
| 3 | 1 | .2 |

*The sum of the ratings by the two judges.

components of ingenuity in writing. Watch also for the occasional paper in which the writer seems to ignore the picture entirely.

The scorer should also notice whether, having accepted the role of an older student, a parent, or a member of the audience, the writer is consistent in speaking (i.e., writing) in that voice. Ingenuity would also require consistency of tone and a certain penetration of the subtleties of the world in the way the role-playing is carried out.

In arriving at a score in Aspect III, the person scoring may find it helpful to think of the writer's response to the picture and instructions as having one of the following characteristics:

Good: 3 Clever and appropriate to the picture and instructions

Fair: 2 Clever but inappropriate to the picture and instructions; or uninventive but appropriate to the picture and instructions

Poor: 1 Uninventive and inappropriate to the picture and instructions

**Manuscript Form; Bonus, Penalty Points (+1, 0,−1)**

Add a point for an exceptionally neat paper which is easy to read, attractive, and in perfect or almost perfect letter form.

Note that the letter could be in either a business letter or a personal letter style, depending on which of the three formats was followed. Certainly, something should be subtracted if the writing was *not* in letter form at all.

Also, gross illegibility or total grubbiness of appearance of the manuscript should be realistically considered to detract from the writing performance. This shortcoming should also result in a minus 1 score.

**Total Score**

The total score would be the sum of adding aspects I, II, and III, and plus or minus the bonus or penalty score for manuscript form.

## Scoring Instructions for Essay Topic D

*(See Table 6 for results.)*

**Writing Directions for the Student**

Not all inventions have been good for all mankind. Name one invention we would be better off without. Discuss why we would be better off as a civilization without that invention.

**Score for Composition**

Use a scale of 1–9, but use even points primarily. The first decision is whether the paper is in the upper half or lower half of the papers written for this topic. Should the paper be rated 2, 4, 6, or 8? Then refine your scoring, using odd numbers to reward things which stand out—language use, freshness, crispness—or to lower the score of a paper which was a struggle to read.

Papers are given two readings, and the scores from the two readings are added together. A paper can receive a final score of 2–18. Only a blank paper will receive a zero.

Papers with scores more than two numbers apart are given a third reading by the table leader.

The reader should keep in mind that he or she is not looking for errors to correct; rather, the reader is rewarding the writer for what he or she does well in response to the topic. The word *invention* should not be defined too narrowly; an invention can be an idea or theory as well as a tangible object. Some papers will be developed primarily by factual evidence; others, by a series of reasons. Both kinds of development ought to be considered equally valid responses. Clear presentation of ideas, evidence, and experience ought to be rewarded, even when reasoning seems mediocre, thin, or fallacious in part. The writer should be rewarded for his or her handling of the question; and the score should not be raised or lowered because the reader approves or disapproves of values expressed. The reader should be as alert as possible to any indirect connection to the writing since the quality of writing is being judged, not the reading of the directions for the topic.

**Score for Competency in English**

The reader judges the writer's overall skills in punctuation, diction and usage, and sentence sense. Scores are assigned according to the following broad descriptions:

*5* Outstandingly varied, mature sentences, with strong diction and almost no errors; notable in use of subordination and free of modifiers

*4* Above-average sentence sense; few errors in usage or punctuation (and none of them major); perhaps some hint of a sense of style

*3* About average for the papers scored; many short sentences, perhaps with some comma faults and an occasional fragment; but overall, a suggestion that the student has a fair grasp of sentence sense

*2* A cluster of errors in grammar, usage, and punctuation, or a paper which has a dead-level simplicity and monotony of style; practically no sentence without an error of some kind; but in spite of these problems, generally readable.

*1* A paper so badly marred with problems that the reader can hardly follow the ideas presented, either because of stumbling syntax (mixed structures and the like) or because of word choices and such

egregious form problems (including spelling) that the reader finds it difficult to be sympathetic with the writer

*Note:* Matters of spelling are intentionally *not* specified in the descriptions of papers rated 5, 4, 3, and 2. The reader should ignore spelling except for the 1 paper. This category allows for the paper with so many misspelled words that the reader must actually struggle to follow the thread of thought. Such a paper suggests a degree of near illiteracy.

**TABLE 6**

**Scores for Essay Topic D: Discussing an Invention**

| Composition | | | Competency in English | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Combined score* | Number of essays per score | Percent of essays per score | Combined score* | Number of essays per score | Percent of essays per score |
| 18 | 1 | .1 | 10 | 6 | .7 |
| 17 | 12 | 1.3 | 9 | 14 | 1.6 |
| 16 | 41 | 4.6 | 8 | 103 | 11.4 |
| 15 | 48 | 5.3 | 7 | 178 | 19.7 |
| 14 | 71 | 7.9 | 6 | 293 | 32.4 |
| 13 | 81 | 9.0 | 5 | 178 | 19.7 |
| 12 | 96 | 10.7 | 4 | 90 | 10.0 |
| 11 | 69 | 7.7 | 3 | 31 | 3.4 |
| 10 | 106 | 11.8 | 2 | 10 | 1.1 |
| 9 | 92 | 10.2 | | | |
| 8 | 84 | 9.3 | | | |
| 7 | 74 | 8.2 | | | |
| 6 | 56 | 6.2 | | | |
| 5 | 39 | 4.3 | | | |
| 4 | 16 | 1.8 | | | |
| 3 | 9 | 1.0 | | | |
| 2 | 6 | .7 | | | |

*The sum of the ratings by the two judges.

## Scoring Instructions for Essay Topic E

*(See Table 7 for results.)*

**Writing Directions for the Student**

Here is a diagram of an automobile accident. Study the diagram for a while and then describe the accident in your own words.

**Instructions to Raters**

The writer should be rewarded for the accuracy and completeness of his or her facts in response to the topic, and the writer should also be rewarded for the smoothness with which he or she works all these facts into readable paragraphs.

**Scoring**

A numerical scale of 1–9 is used.

**Content**

For a description to be acceptable, it must mention *5* of the following *6* pieces of information:

a. Name of the street for each car
b. Direction each car was traveling
c. Light each one had
d. The fact that each was turning
e. The fact that a collision occurred
f. The time of the accident

If the description contains a mistake—for instance, says that car #1 had a yellow light or that car #2 was turning right—consider this factor in scoring but do not disqualify the paper.

Because the topic involves the reporting of an incident, the *ordering* of the facts should have a strong bearing on the evaluation. There should first be some sort of introductory statement to the description of the incident; then there should be a relating of the time, location, people, or objects involved and their placement or actions (not necessarily in the sequence indicated here). As long as the writer is consistent in his or her ordering of elements, he or

she need not adhere to any standards of relative importance (e.g., as a journalist or policeman might have to do). Absence of a concluding sentence or statement should not necessarily affect the score.

No consideration is made of extraneous information or judgments of who was at fault.

### Mechanics

Needless repetition should affect the score.

The score would be weakened by such errors as mistaken use of commas, quotation marks, end punctuation, apostrophes, colons, semicolons, dashes; also, sentence overloads, run-on sentences, comma splices, and fragments of sentences ignorantly or accidentally punctuated as complete sentences. Watch for unnecessary punctuation.

The scorer should lower the score for such errors as malapropisms, wordiness, paucity of vocabulary, circumlocution, jargon, needless lack of economy and directions, excessive use of euphemisms, inappropriate levels of usage, damaged or mixed figures of speech, triteness of metaphor, faulty parallelism, awkward phrasing, lack of concreteness, vagueness, excessive formality, imprecise word choice, and general incoherence.

**TABLE 7**

**Scores for Essay Topic E: Describing an Accident**

| Combined score* | Number of essays per score | Percent of essays per score |
|---|---|---|
| 18 | 1 | .1 |
| 17 | 8 | .8 |
| 16 | 21 | 2.2 |
| 15 | 41 | 4.3 |
| 14 | 53 | 5.6 |
| 13 | 91 | 9.6 |
| 12 | 99 | 10.4 |
| 11 | 117 | 12.3 |
| 10 | 120 | 12.6 |
| 9 | 124 | 13.1 |
| 8 | 86 | 9.1 |
| 7 | 67 | 7.1 |
| 6 | 37 | 3.9 |
| 5 | 28 | 3.0 |
| 4 | 27 | 2.8 |
| 3 | 21 | 2.2 |
| 2 | 8 | .8 |

*The sum of the ratings by the two judges.

**TABLE 8**

**Characteristics of Student Essays, by Group**

| Group | Characteristics | |
|---|---|---|
| | Strengths | Weaknesses |
| High | Appropriate response to directions<br>Creative approach<br>Consistent tone<br>Vivid description of detail<br>Precise, varied vocabulary<br>Varied sentence structure<br>Coherent, well-supported paragraph development<br>Adequate use of standard English<br>Adequate spelling<br>Adequate capitalization<br>Adequate punctuation | Some difficulties with punctuation |
| Middle | Appropriate response to directions<br>Consistent tone<br>Specific description of detail<br>Varied vocabulary<br>Basic grasp of sentence structure<br>Some sense of order, organization, and development<br>Generally adequate spelling<br>Generally adequate capitalization<br>Generally adequate punctuation | Insufficient paragraph development<br>Some difficulties with sentences<br>Some difficulties with standard English usage<br>Some difficulties with punctuation |
| Low | A majority of appropriate responses to directions<br>Consistent tone | Extreme brevity<br>Limited vocabulary<br>Many difficulties with sentences<br>Insufficient paragraph development<br>Many departures from standard English usage<br>Some spelling errors<br>Many punctuation errors |

**TABLE 9**

**Correlation Coefficients Between School Mean Scores on Survey of Basic Skills: Grade 12 and School Mean Scores for Each Essay**

| Type of essay | Correlation coefficients | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Sentences | | | | | | |
| | Recognition and manipulation[a] | Capitalization and punctuation | Written expression | Paragraphs | Word forms | Language choices | Written expression |
| Essay A (Object) | | | | | | | |
| Composition | .58[b] | .77 | .67 | .54 | .49 | .66 | .63 |
| Mechanics | .67 | .81 | .71 | .62 | .52 | .71 | .71 |
| Essay B (Directions): | | | | | | | |
| Composition | .76 | .81 | .63 | .30 | .64 | .38 | .47 |
| Essay C (Letter): | | | | | | | |
| Composition | .47 | .38 | .47 | .47 | .48 | .51 | .51 |
| Essay D (Invention): | | | | | | | |
| Composition | .46 | .77 | .68 | .64 | .49 | .58 | .52 |
| Mechanics | .43 | .65 | .61 | .56 | .39 | .57 | .50 |
| Essay E (Accident): | | | | | | | |
| Composition | .52 | .80 | .71 | .72 | .48 | .54 | .70 |
| Average school score for all essays | | | | | | | .79 |

[a]See Appendix D for a brief description of skills tested in each section of the *Survey of Basic Skills: Grade 12.*

[b]In the computation of these coefficients, the scores on the *Survey of Basic Skills* for all students in a school were averaged; the scores on each essay were averaged; and the correlations were computed for these school averages. Correlation coefficients can vary from −1.0 to +1.0. If two sets of numbers are totally unrelated, the coefficient is 0.0. When they are in perfect agreement and in the same direction, the coefficient is 1.0. For example, if the school with the highest *Survey of Basic Skills* score had the highest essay score average and the second highest on one was the second highest on the other, and so on, the coefficient would be 1.0.

# Discussion of Results

Over the past six years, the state average on standardized objective tests of written expression has steadily declined. In 1969-70 the state average on the *Iowa Tests of Educational Development* (Chicago: Science Research Associates, Inc.) was at the 42nd percentile of the publisher's norm group. Every year since then the state average has declined by two percentile points. In 1974-75 the state average was at the 32nd percentile. The inevitable question is, How great is this decline in terms of the students' actual writing ability? To answer this question, one would need information for a number of years from studies of actual student composition. Since such information is not available, this study answered the next best question, How well do students write today?

### General Conclusions on Writing Ability

The results of the California Writing Assessment suggest that the vast majority of students are capable of communicating through writing. Among this majority a great range and variety of writing skills were exhibited. Only a very small proportion of students were totally unable to write intelligibly in English. Although most students demonstrated the rudimentary skills of writing–such as appropriate use of vocabulary, a fundamental grasp of sentence structure, and basic spelling ability–many students lacked sophistication in such areas as paragraph development, use of complex sentences, and punctuation.

Great differences existed between the high and low groups in overall writing ability and in specific strengths and weaknesses. Students who wrote well tended to do well in all dimensions of writing, including content and mechanics. The only commonly observed weakness for the high group was the inability to use commas correctly. On the other hand, students who wrote poorly tended to have difficulties in all dimensions of writing. The only frequently noted strengths for the low group were consistency of tone and appropriate response to directions.

### Comparison with Results of the Survey of Basic Skills

The written expression section of the *Survey of Basic Skills: Grade 12* consists of a multiple-choice objective test that yields certain kinds of information. Although students taking the *Survey of Basic Skills* test are not required to compose, they are tested on linguistic skills considered fundamental to the writing process.

The California Writing Assessment went beyond the *Survey of Basic Skills* by requiring students to write essays. The holistic scoring procedures used to rate the essays provided a different kind of information–namely, a distribution of scores that reflected overall quality. By design, holistic scoring procedures did not yield a breakdown of strengths and weaknesses. Although the appraisal of strengths and weaknesses did address this issue in a fairly reliable manner, the procedure used did not yield information that could easily be compared with the results of the *Survey of Basic Skills*. In spite of the limitations, however, an effort was made to compare the two sets of information about student writing.

Two findings drawn from the pattern of strengths and weaknesses observed in the 1975 results of the *Survey of Basic Skills* are presented in *Student Achievement in California Schools: 1974-75 Annual Report*. Those findings are presented and discussed here in light of the results of the California Writing Assessment.

#### Finding Number One

> . . . Students in the twelfth grade appeared to perform better with items involving concepts, such as identifying irrelevant material in a paragraph, than with items involving conventions, such as applying the rules of capitalization and punctuation. Twelfth grade perfor-

mance in punctuation and capitalization indicated a distinct deficiency in both areas.[1]

The writing assessment results were inconclusive as to the finding that California students in grade twelve were more proficient in the conceptual aspects of writing than in those involving conventions and rules. The comparison is complicated by the high relationship between student performance in these two areas that was found in the assessment. That is, students who did well in one area (concepts) did well in the other (conventions), and students who had difficulty in one area also had difficulty in the other.

Contrary to the finding presented in the report of student achievement, student performance in capitalization and punctuation in the writing assessment was judged as generally adequate for three-fourths of the sample. Although some difficulties with punctuation were noted for the top and middle groups, the writing assessment indicated that these difficulties did not typically obstruct the communication process. (Performance in a given skill area had to detract from communication to qualify as a weakness on the checklist used in the appraisal of strengths and weaknesses. See Appendix E.) Furthermore, the essay test procedure provided students the flexibility of avoiding certain errors by choosing safe forms of expression over more troublesome ones.

On the *Survey of Basic Skills*, however, students were required to deal with all skill areas tested. Consequently, one would expect more satisfactory performance in mechanics on the more flexible measure than on the more highly structured one. Thus, the apparent discrepancy between the two findings is largely the result of different assessment methods and different criteria for judging adequacy of performance. It seems reasonable to conclude that although a higher degree of sophistication in punctuation might be desirable, most students demonstrated a level of competency in mechanics sufficient for basic communication.

**Finding Number Two (Part A)**

> Twelfth grade performance indicated student strength in such fundamentals achieving subject-verb agreement within a sentence and cohesiveness and unity within a paragraph.[2]

The results from the writing sample confirmed the conclusion that the majority of students in grade twelve (students in the high and middle groups) performed adequately in the rudimentary skills of writing. Essays were judged as adequate for these two groups in vocabulary, sentence structure, and spelling. The bottom group, however, was weak in these skill areas.

**Finding Number Two (Part B)**

> . . . The test results indicated that students had more difficulty with those items requiring more linguistic sophistication, such as selecting effective subordination and coordination of ideas within sentences and selecting economical, effective statements rather than wordier, less effective sentences.[3]

Writing sample results generally support the conclusion that students lack skill in the use of complex sentence structures. The low group lacked mastery of even the fundamentals of sentence structure, and the middle group had "some difficulties with sentences." Only the high group was consistently described as strong in sentence structure.

### Major Conclusions of the Study

On the basis of the foregoing results and discussion, the following conclusions can be drawn:

1. Although a steady decline has occurred in the results of the standardized tests of written expression used in the California Assessment Program, the results of the California Writing Assessment indicated that the vast majority of seniors in California were able to communicate adequately through writing. Only a very small percent of students were completely unable to communicate through written English.
2. The students showed a great range and variety of writing skill on their essays. Students who wrote well tended to do well in all dimensions of writing, including content and mechanics. Students who wrote poorly tended to have difficulties in all dimensions of writing.
3. For each of the five essay topics provided, the average scores for girls were slightly higher than those for boys.
4. The school averages of scores achieved by students on the *Survey of Basic Skills: Grade*

[1] *Student Achievement in California Schools: 1974-75 Annual Report*, Sacramento: California State Department of Education, 1975, pp. 34, 37.

[2] *Ibid.*, p. 37.

[3] *Ibid.*, p. 37.

*12*, the state's objective assessment instrument, were found to correlate substantially (.79) with the school averages of scores achieved on the essay test. That is, schools that scored high on the objective test tended to score high on the writing assessment, and schools that scored low on the objective test tended to score low on the writing assessment.

# Appendix A

# Acknowledgments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**Participants in the Writing Assessment**

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## Appendix B

# Checklist for Dimensions in Writing

Check the following categories as a strength or weakness only if you can say *yes* in the following test question frames:

*Strength:* Did the student's demonstrated performance in _____ contribute to his or her ability to communicate effectively in this essay? *If yes,* then check as a *strength.*

*Weakness*—Did the student's demonstrated performance in _____ detract from his or her ability to communicate effectively in this essay? *If yes,* then check as a *weakness.*

| | *Strength* | *Weakness* |
|---|---|---|
| I. Competencies | | |
| A. Vocabulary (precision, specificity, freshness, originality) | _____ | _____ |
| B. Sentence sense (coherence within and between sentences; subordination, coordination, parallelism; avoidance of wordy, redundant, and awkward phrasing; avoidance of ineffective run-ons and fragments) | _____ | _____ |
| C. Paragraph development (coherence within and between paragraphs; effective transitions; consistency of tense, person, point of view) | _____ | _____ |
| D. Usage (verb forms, pronoun reference, subject-verb agreement, inflectional and derivational endings) | _____ | _____ |
| E. Capitalization | _____ | _____ |
| F. Punctuation | _____ | _____ |
| G. Spelling | _____ | _____ |
| *Other:* | | |
| H. | _____ | _____ |
| I. | _____ | _____ |
| J. | _____ | _____ |
| II. Content | | |
| A. Appropriate response to directions | _____ | _____ |
| B. Ideas and insights | _____ | _____ |
| C. Reasoning, support, development | _____ | _____ |
| D. Ingenuity, creativity, originality | _____ | _____ |
| E. Observation and description | _____ | _____ |
| F. Tone, style | _____ | _____ |
| *Other:* | | |
| G. | _____ | _____ |
| H. | _____ | _____ |
| I. | _____ | _____ |
| J. | _____ | _____ |

Comment: _____

_____

_____

_____

# Appendix C

# Illustrative Student Essays

**Essay Topic A: Describing an Object**

**Essay Topic B: Giving Directions**

**Essay Topic C: Composing a Letter**

**Essay Topic D: Discussing an Invention**

**Essay Topic E: Describing an Accident**

All essays contained in Appendix C are presented as they were written by participating students. Only the names of the students and the original scoring marks have been eliminated. The essays are grouped by topic and, within each topic, by scores (from high to low). The scores awarded each essay can be found at the beginning of the essay. The text of this publication should be consulted for the criteria used in the awarding of scores.

The student essays may be used in the following ways:

1. *As a means of interpreting the results of the present study.* The essays illustrate the range of writing abilities demonstrated by a representative sample of California's twelfth grade students.
2. *As an evaluation scale for rating the quality of other essays written in a similar mode of discourse in other writing assessments.* The essays may be used as a measuring instrument by matching them with unscored essays to obtain a rank ordering or a scoring for the other essays. (The essays included in Appendix C received identical holistic scores on independent ratings by two evaluators.)

## Essay Topic A: Describing an Object

**Score: 8, 8**

In the corner of my bedroom, there stands a large, purple cat. On numerous occasions my mother has attempted to persuade me to throw this stuffed animal away, but I have always resisted such an action. Because of an extreme attachment to Charlie, I have never been able to discard him like a worthless piece of trash.

It all started many years ago when on a shopping trip with my mother my attention was captured by an enormous number of stuffed animals covering approximately eight cars in the showroom of the downtown mall the local Datsun car dealer was introducing his new 1964 compact cars. As an attraction he was having a drawing for the animals sitting on the cars. After many tears and much pleading, my mother finally consented to obtain several of the desired tickets. While fidgetting like any normal seven year old would in such a crisis, I prayed that I would win one of these beautiful creatures. In fact, I had my eye on a particular velvety cat on the hood of a blue stationwagon. At last the time of the drawing came and my heart began to beat with anticipation. The first number was called, the second, the third... until at last the tenth and final ticket was withdrawn from the barrel. Sadness, a feeling that swept through my soul with a terrifying numbness. A feeling that I wished never to experience again. As I slowly walked away, my shoulder was caught by a gentleman in a dark brown suit. He said I looked so disappointed that if my mother would agree to take me to the rear lot, he would allow me to pick one of the stuffed animals there. She did agree and to my surprise there was an exact copy of the cat I seen previously. That night there was a very happy girl who went to sleep with a purple, stuffed cat named Charlie next to her.

Over the years that cat has been an inspiration to me when I feel down I can always look at it and think of a small girl with her hopes shattered to the lowest point being made extremely happy by a compassionate man. It gives my hope that there still are people in the world who care about little girls. It is no wonder that I cannot bear to part with such a comforting friend.

**Score: 6, 6**

My most prized possession is an antique, stand up radio. The fine wood is perfectly smooth and without any marks.

This radio is still in fine condition and it can pick up all stations, even police broadcasts.

I came across this radio about 4 years ago at a man named Mr. Way's home. This lonely man knew all the kids in the neighborhood and we all went there during the afternoons after school to keep him company.

One day I was joking with him about how much I loved that radio and how much I would love to have it. He told me that he never used it and that he was sure I would take good care of it so he turned it over to me and said to call my parents to pick it up.

Everytime someone enters my room, that's the first thing they comment on. I've even had offers from some of my parents friends about buying it but I've always turned them down. I wouldn't sell it for all the money in the world because it's brought me so many happy times!

**Score: 4, 4**

FORD MOTOR COMPANY - FORD, LINCOLN, MERCURY

I like Ford automobiles since we have gotten our 1972 Ford pick-up it has treated us good and we have not had a chance to really ride our 74 cougar that much but so far it has treated us good also we really didn't discover them they were already there we just got tired of repairing our Chevrolets so we turned toward Ford and we're glad we did I feel strongly about them because they are dependable, solid well built cars and they are more quieter and smoother riding and there interiors are more confortable than they appear and it looks like they will last longer and in a demolition derby I seen last year a Ford and Mercury came up on top. I'm not trying to say that I or someone else is going to demolish their car to see how good it is but to me, if a car can take that punishment it should certainly make a good family car and there all I have written about them depends on the owner and how he takes care of it.

## Essay Topic A: Describing an Object (Continued)

Score: 2, 2

They're talking to me - in their own ways — can't you hear them? Or is it because you can't understand them? They talk so plainly - in such a simple language - they comfort me when I'm down - and listen to me when I want to talk - but I have yet to have any one of them talk back, because they can't - its because most people just don't listen - they don't understand, what the ocean, the mountains, the countryside has to offer them - but I believe that to grasp this knowledge you have to just be willing to try to understand; but the best and the easiest way I know of it to grow up with all these things I think everyone would be a better person if they had the opportunity

## Essay Topic B: Giving Directions

Score: 8, 8

I am going to explain the steps for making wine in the following paragraphs. I will try to go into as much detail as possible but as clear as possible too.

The first step in making wine would be to obtain the main ingredient. The main ingredient of wine is the grapes. If you were going to make a red or rose wine you would need red grapes. A white wine would require white grapes.

Secondly you would have to crush the grapes and remove the stems from the pulp and juice. The pulp and juice would then be transferred to a fermentation tank and inoculated with yeast. The yeast cells would multiply and cause the sugar in the grape juice to turn to alcohol and carbon dioxide. This process would continue until the alcohol percent was high enough (about 12.5) to kill the yeast cells. With all the yeast cells dead the fermentation process would cease.

Now that fermentation has stopped you are ready to move the wine to aging tank. The pulp that is left after you draw off the free run juice is pressed. The press wine usually then becomes your bulk or second label wine.

The next step is to let the free run and the press wine age separately. Depending on the winemaker and the wine a red wine will age in wood for one to two years. A white wine on the other hand will age from six months to two years in wood. During the aging process the wine is racked or filtered to remove sediment.

The last step is to bottle the wine and let it age in the bottle if preferred. Bottle aging usually has best results if the wine is of fairly high quality. Bottle aging usually doesn't help bulk wines.

## Essay Topic B: Giving Directions (Continued)

**Score: 6, 6**

In order to repair a flat tire, you must have a spare tire. If you have the spare tire, put your car in park and step on the emergency brake. Then you would find 2 pieces of wood that looked similar as possible as square blocks. This would prevent the car from rolling once jacked up. Then you would need a lug wrench to loosen the lug nuts on the ground. It would be easier & safer to do it on the ground, because the car could wobble and fall, and the tire probably would just spin.

After this you would place the jack in a safe & steady place where the teeth could grab hold and not slip. Then you would jack the car up. Watch the jack! If it starts to move, back off, & let it down, it means the jack is moving. Once the car is jacked up. Remove the tire and replace it with the spare. Then tighten the lugnuts just enough to keep the tire in place. Then let the car down, and retighten the lugnuts. Remove the blocks & drive off carefully.

**Score: 4,4**

How to Make a Nightstand

The first thing that you do is draw out your plans, and find out how much wood you'll need, you get your wood and Surface it. After it is all surfaced to the thickness that you want you cut out the pieces that you'll need, two sides, one top, two division rails, and a back. When everything is all cut out then you are ready to assemble your nightstand.

When assembling you get your two side pieces, and glue the two bearing rails inside where you have your dados cut at then you add your top. When it has completely dried you sand your nightstand with a vibrating sander to get all rough spots or scratches in it out, when you're all finished your ready to Stain it.

**Score: 2, 2**

When I go to work after school, I put on my apron and I start putting things on the shelf. Then someone calls me up to the front of the store, and I start putting food in the bags. After that I put the bags in their car. I do the same old thing everyday of the year.

## Essay Topic C: Composing a Letter

**Score: 3, 3, 3; 3, 3, 3**

Dear Mrs. Hanson,  March 4, 1975

Last Friday night, as you know, the first grade class of Oakwood Elementary School, took part in a special music presentation called "Music Now."

As the chairmen of the organization of the program, several weeks ago I had the students teacher send home a notice to their parents asking for volunteers to help with the planning, etc. I received very good response from most of the mothers of the children. And I had noticed that you did not acknowledge the notice. I assumed you were a busy housewife and had no time to invest in volunteer work.

The children, along with the "mother helpers" spent many hours practicing and rehearsing to put on a good show. The kids were really hard and enthusiastic workers, especially your daughter Elizabeth. She tried very hard to play her violin well, and I know she was looking forward to playing for you, her proud parents. I know, as a parent of a little boyfriend of your daughter's that all of the children were looking forward to that special night, especially Elizabeth.

Finally, as that night arrived, the backstage of the auditorium was bustling with nervous children and anxious mothers.

When the time came for the violin presentation (which my son took part in along with your daughter) every thing was going along smoothly, until I noticed your daughter begin to cry. I saw my son try to console her, but to no avail. I was terribly busy in the mean time, trying to unstick a little boys thumb from a prop backstage.

It was time for curtain call, and I noticed your daughter had not lined up I quickly ran over to her and asked her what was wrong. All I was able to get from her, between sobs, was that her "mommy and daddy didn't come to see her play her violin," and she refused to play. The violin presentation went on without her, but it was just not the same.

Now, I don't want to think that I am a busy-body, and I know that this is probably none of my business, but don't you think you could have taken some time out of your busy schedule to have come and seen your daughter perform? She was so very hurt and disappointed.

Thank You,
Mrs. John West

**Score: 2, 2, 2; 2, 2, 2**

Dear Valley Vista Music Teacher;

Im writing you this letter to let you know how I felt about your Show, on June 3 1973. The Show It Self was Very good.

A few of your Students need help in appearing in the public. I felt Some what Sorry for the little girl who looked so Scared in front of all the people.

The Other Students Shoud have Kept Playing there own music, And Shouldn't have Stopped for her.

As a whole I enjoy all of the P.T.A Shows that you ever put on and Thank you Very much.

Sincerely
Mrs. R.E. Jones

**Score: 1, 1, 1; 1, 1, 1**

Dear Mr. Jones,

I thought your [illegible] was great except the little girl who I felt was afraid of being on stage, she shouldn't have been performing.

Thank you

## Essay Topic D: Discussing an Invention

**Score: 8, 8**

Down through the years many inventions intended for the good of man have become extremely dangerous or harmful. One of these is atomic power. Originally intended to provide mankind with a source of energy, it now is the major threat to the existence of man.

When Albert Einstein discovered the principle of nuclear fission and helped scientists find ways to use this power, he must surely have intended it to be used for the good of mankind. It is now being used to produce electrical power and in some places for the desalinization of sea water where fresh water is scarce. But with the development of the atomic bombard its explosion on Hiroshima and in Nagasaki, it has become the major threat to modern civilization. Today, six countries around the world have the capability of using nuclear bombs for warfare, but two of the countries, the United States and Russia, have enough nuclear warheads to wipe each others of the face of the earth.

But even more astounding is the fact that just three men have the ability to release the ruin of nuclear destruction. The President of the U.S., and the rulers of China and Russia each can push a button that would release an arsenal of missile, anti-missile, and anti-anti-missiles to target anywhere in the world. The extent of destruction would not be limited just to the target area, but atomic particles, invisible but deadly, would be blown to the four corners of the earth, affecting people thousands of miles from the target areas.

Nuclear weapons aren't the only threat though. With the invention of the breeder reactor, which uses plutonium instead of uranium for fuel, another potential hazard was created. If plutonium doesn't decay as uranium does, but keeps its power for about 24,000 years. A small particle, small enough to be carried through the air and breathed by a person, can cause lung cancer and death in a very short time. Officials at the power plants that use and produce plutonium claim that it is completely safe because of safety precautions they have taken, but several accidents and a fire have proved them wrong. These accidents however resulted in several deaths.

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**Score; 6, 6**

The Gun

Without the gun, where could this world be! It would be very difficult to fight wars without guns. How influencial would the mafia be without a gun? What would the rapists do for excitement and the armed burglars do for money. It would be much easier to register them, because we wouldn't need to. Of course, Frederick Remington probably wouldn't be so thrilled, but if he was that good a business man, then he could have made it with bronzes or something else. Police wouldn't have to shoot us, they could simply crash our skulls with their billy clubs!

But if there were no guns, there would be no bullets and what would those courageous men in the early days out west have shot on while a spear was being removed from his body.

And for the target shooter, no paper would be wasted to make them & we wouldn't have to clip pigeons in clay and throw them in the air to be shattered in mid air.

## Essay Topic D: Discussing an Invention (Continued)

**Score: 4, 4**

Man Made

Inventions of things have been with us since the beginning of time. What I think an invention began or thought of is the idea or curiosity of man's mind. Most all inventions of man are used everyday in our lives. The inventions that are used more frequently are the one that have in the most. There is one invention that most people have in there home and that's a car.

The automobile automobile is very useful to us, but it is also harmful us and our environment. Our country is being torn down by roads, freeways, highways. Most people say that if we don't have a cars, then how are we going see our beautiful country. I am one of those people who say that because when I was born I was taken everywhere in a car, so I was brought up by the kind of transportation. People from other countries do not have the kind of an environment, but yet they manage to move around, and go places....

**Score: 2, 2**

NOT ALL INVENTIONS HAVE BEEN GOOD FOR ALL MANKIND. NAME ONE INVENTION WE WOULD BE BETTER WITHOUT. DISCUSS WHY WE WOULD HAVE BEEN BETTER OFF AS A CIVILIZATION WITHOUT THAT INVENTION. THERE IS NO INVENTION THAT I CAN THINK OF THAT WE AS A CIVILIZATION WOULD HAVE BEEN BETTER OFF WITHOUT. MANKIND WOULDN'T HAVE INVENTED ANYTHING IF IT WASN'T USEFUL.

## Essay Topic E: Describing an Accident

**Score: 8, 8**

At approximately 6:45 a.m. on June 24 1975, on the corner of Main Street and Homer Avenue, vehicle #1 was heading west-bound on Homer Avenue and vehicle # 2 was heading north-bound on Main Street. Vehicle #1 had a flashing red light on the northeast corner which required him to stop completely before proceeding safely across Main Street. Vehicle #2 had a flashing yellow light on the southeast corner of Homer Avenue which required him to slow down and look, but not stop if not necessary, and proceed with caution. Both vehicles were making left hand turns from their respective corners. Vehicle #1 made a left turn in front of #2 which did not have to stop and had the right-of-way, causing #2 to hit #1 on the driver's side of the car.

Assuming weather was clear and streets were dry, Vehicle #1 caused traffic accident because he was required to stop and #2 wasn't.

**Score: 6, 6**

Insure with Interstate

On June 24 1975 at 6:45 am an automobile accident occured involving two cars The location of the accident was at Homer Ave and Main st.

Car # 1 was preceeding west on Homer Ave. Arriving at the intersection of Main st and Homer Ave., car #1 made a left turn going south. At the northeast corner there was a flashing red light. This light meant to stop and then to proceed with caution when traffic is clear.

Car #2 was preceeding north on Main st. Arriving at the intersection of Homer Ave and Main st., car # 2 made a left turn going west. At the southeast corner there was a flashing yellow light. This meant to yield with caution

Apparently car # 1 did not stop with caution, causing car # 2 to hit car # 1

Everyone should drive carefully with caution Before driving you should always make sure you have your drivers license. Also be sure to have car insurance. In case you should happen to be involved in a automobile accident.

## Essay Topic E: Describing an Accident (Continued)

**Score; 4, 4**

Car No/ was going west on Homer Ave. Car No 2 was going north on Main St. Car / failed to stop at the corner of main and Homer for a red flashing light and car No 2 had only a yellow cautuon light. Car No/ was making a left turn to be going South on main st and Car No 2 was making a left turn to be going West on Homer Ave. They hit right in the middle of the intersection. But car No/ was in fault because he failed stop at the light

**Score; 2, 2**

The car traveling from east to west (1) is the apparent driver at fault because he not like the driver who was traveling from south to north (2) had a flashing red light while the driver in car no 2 only had a flashing yellow which only means to slow down but not stop. I put the fault blame on driver number(1) by the information given as it seems he ignored the flashing red and proceeded to make his left turn

# Appendix D

# Writing Skills Tested by the Survey of Basic Skills: Grade 12 1974-75

| Skill area | Description of skills assessed | Number of questions | Illustrative test question |
|---|---|---|---|
| Word parts | The student must interpret a dictionary item, hyphenate a word, interpret word meaning, or alphabetize a series of words. | 5 | Silver (sil'ver) n.: a soft, white, metallic element used for coins, articles of plate, and so on.<br>The dictionary entry above indicates that *silver* should be pronounced with the stress:<br>☐ On both syllables<br>☐ On the first syllable only<br>☐ On the second syllable only<br>☐ Between the first and second syllables |
| Language choices | The student must identify varying levels of abstraction, differentiate any attitude-conveying words and phrases, select the most appropriate word for a blank in a sentence, or judge the appropriateness of diction in terms of a given audience. | 21 | Which of the following words or groups of words is most general?<br>☐ Model plane building<br>☐ Hobby<br>☐ Activity<br>☐ Pastime |
| Sentence recognition and manipulation | The student must select the most effective sentence or sentence element, select a verb form that agrees with the subject, or identify the best way to combine two or more sentences to show a given relationship. | 19 | Mark the square in front of the best way of writing the underlined part.<br>On Saturday he bathed the cat, which she needed very badly.<br>☐ Bathed the cat, which she needed very badly.<br>☐ Bathed the cat, which she very badly had need of.<br>☐ Gave the cat a badly needed bath.<br>☐ Gave the cat a bath, being badly needed. |
| Punctuation and capitalization | The student must identify the conventional uses of the comma, quotation marks, and apostrophe, colon, or semicolon and must recognize the conventions for capitalization. | 22 | Select the underlined part that contains an error in capitalization or punctuation; fill in *D* if there is no error.<br>"It's (A) necessary to find you're (B) report form, Henrietta," (C) stated her boss.<br>☐ A<br>☐ B<br>☐ C<br>☐ D (No error) |
| Paragraphs | The student must identify irrelevant sentences; recognize the best combination of a series of short, choppy sentences; select a statement that best summarizes one or more paragraphs; recognize logical development, transitional elements, and time shifts within a paragraph. | 14 | Which word in sentence 5 in the passage (not printed here) indicates that the next paragraph will develop another topic?<br>☐ Illnesses<br>☐ However<br>☐ Since<br>☐ Age |

*Source:* Based on material contained in *Student Achievement in California Schools: 1974-75 Annual Report* (Sacramento: California State Department of Education, 1975).

*Note: The Survey of Basic Skills: Grade 12* has been revised.



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